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STATE FOR NEA/FO (GRAY) AND NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)
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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER MASS OREP TS

SUBJECT: CODEL TANNER MEETINGS FOCUS ON COUNTERTERRORISM,
NATO

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) AND (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) During their May 30 to June 1 visit to Tunisia, the ten members of CODEL Tanner were warmly welcomed by GOT officials who stressed the history of positive bilateral relations between the United States and Tunisia.

Highlighting that Tunisia is a loyal friend, FM Abdallah and Defense Minister Morjane both pressed for increased military assistance. Morjane delivered an impassioned plea for US assistance for the Tunisian military to combat terrorism and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), while Abdallah also pressed for greater trade ties. CODEL Tanner also met with President Ben Ali (septel) and Chamber of Deputies President Foued M'bazaa, who offered his support for parliamentary cooperation while separately claiming the US Embassy was not the target of a disrupted terrorist cell. Delegation members, who said they were in Tunisia to listen, also pressed for greater counterterrorism cooperation and praised Tunisia's economic and social success. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The following members of CODEL Tanner, led by Rep. John Tanner (D-TN), visited Tunisia from May 30 - June 1:

Rep. Paul Gillmor (R-OH)
Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO)
Rep. John Shimkus (R-IL)
Rep. Dennis Moore (R-KS)
Rep. John Boozman (R-AR)
Rep. Baron Hill (D-IN)
Rep. Albert Chandler (D-KY)
Rep. Kendrick Meek (D-FL)
Rep. Charles Melton (D-LA)

In addition to their government meetings, the delegation also visited the American Battle Monuments Commission North Africa Cemetery and were hosted by the Ambassador for a reception with GOT officials, civil society and business contacts.

¶3. (SBU) In a June 1 press conference at the conclusion of their visit, Chairman Tanner and Rep. Gillmor stressed that the United States and Tunisia have a long history of friendship and shared values. They noted the delegation was impressed with Tunisia's social and economic progress and would share this positive impression with their congressional colleagues. Both congressmen noted that Tunisia is ready for increased political freedom, particularly freedom of expression and association, although press coverage focused little on this point. Noting that Islam is not the cause of

extremism, Rep. Tanner said that we must work together to fight fundamentalist fanaticism. Rep. Gillmor added that he hoped more US companies would invest in Tunisia.

FM: Good Relations, but More Trade and Aid Needed

14. (C) Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah began his May 30 meeting with CODEL Tanner with a lengthy overview of Tunisia's success in combating terrorism and poverty while fostering moderation and tolerance. Tunisia has made an irreversible choice to increase democracy, liberty and pluralism and is advancing "as quickly as possible" towards these goals. Abdallah said that Tunisia's efforts had resulted in the elimination of extremism, but that counterterrorism (CT) remained a priority. He added that bilateral cooperation on political, security, and CT efforts is excellent. When the Ambassador said further CT information sharing was needed, Abdallah agreed that more could be done to improve security and trade relations. Specifically, Abdallah said that Tunisia would like to attract more US businesses and that he wished Tunisia was better known in the US business community. During his upcoming June visit to Washington, Abdallah said that he would seek to "improve our image in the United States." He added that Tunisia's military needs US support, noting that, "We benefit from every little bit" of US aid. Chairman Tanner closed by thanking the Minister for his suggestions and saying that the delegation is aware of the military's need and will seek to improve relations.

DefMin: Urgent Need for Increased Military Assistance

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15. (S) Minister of National Defense Kamel Morjane also used his May 31 meeting with the delegation to argue for increased US aid, particularly Foreign Military Financing (FMF). Morjane told Reps. Tanner, Gillmor, Shimkus and Emerson that the Tunisian Armed Forces, which have never been a GOT priority, are stretched to the limits by recent increases in counterterrorism and border surveillance activities. (NOTE: Historically, GOT budget priorities are education, social programs and funding for the Ministry of Interior. END NOTE.) To combat terrorism, the United States and Tunisia must cooperate, both in terms of sharing information and intelligence, but also through the provision of equipment and material assistance. In response to a question from Rep. Gillmor, Morjane explained that that terrorist threat to Tunisia is complicated by the difficult nature of the country's borders, particularly in the southern desert region. He opined that he did not believe the Al-Qaeda system has any structure or hierarchy, as it seems that even a single individual could announce he is an Al-Qaeda cell. More dangerous, said Morjane, is the fact that terrorism has become an ideology, rather than a means to an end. Terrorism has no borders, therefore military and security cooperation is more important than ever. "We talk about globalization," said Morjane, but the terrorists "are using it" to their advantage.

16. (C) Returning to the need for more military assistance, Morjane clarified that ten years ago FMF cuts were not serious. Today, the need is urgent, as half of Tunisia's army is on the borders and the maintenance of these efforts is extremely costly. Morjane explained, "We count on (the United States) because we cannot depend on ourselves." Tunisia has an urgent need for helicopters, which are suitable for the desert and mountainous border terrain, to support the troops on the borders. Highlighting the need for US assistance, Morjane explained that the Tunisian Air Force is comprised almost entirely of US equipment, and it is difficult to change, even if other partners were willing to

help. He added that material and financial constraints prevent Tunisia's military from offering greater support for bilateral and multilateral objectives, including UN peacekeeping operations. Tunisian Air Force Chief of Staff Brigadier General Mahmoud Ben M'hamed added that Tunisia is familiar with NATO equipment and procedures, but cannot engage in joint operations "because our equipment is too old." With US assistance for Tunisia's equipment, the military could dedicate its own funds to upgrading existing facilities and engaging in more exercises. BG Ben M'hamed lamented the delays in Tunisia's receipt of refurbished UH-1H helicopters, which the minister assured Rep. Emerson Tunisia is ready to put into immediate use. Chairman Tanner told the Minister that he would look into the helicopters' delay, while Rep. Emerson promised to examine Tunisia's FMF levels.

¶7. (C) Turning to NATO, Minister Morjane urged the group to convey to NATO the importance of explaining its objectives to the Arab and Muslim world. "NATO has a perception issue in the region," Morjane said, in part because of its stance on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. As NATO reviews its mission, "don't let people think NATO is anti-Muslim," warned Morjane.

Deputies: Ready for NATO, not Focused on Security

¶8. (C) During the CODEL's May 31 meeting with Foued M'baza, President of the Chamber of Deputies, M'baza said the Chamber enjoys good relations with the US Congress and would be interested in expanding its relationship with NATO parliamentarians. M'baza suggested an annual Maghreb-NATO parliamentary meeting could be established, particularly as the Chamber's First Vice President Afif Chiboub leads the Arab Maghreb Union Parliamentary Council. Chairman Tanner welcomed the idea, noting that NATO is shifting its focus from Eastern Europe to the Mediterranean. When Congressman Shimkus stressed the need for greater information sharing of threat information, M'baza, detouring from GOT talking points, said that the disrupted December/January terrorism plot targeted tourist areas, not the US embassy. While the investigation is underway, M'baza said that it is clear that the Tunisian public rejects such activities and extremism, more generally. Ambassador said that the USG recognized Tunisia's success in disrupting the plot and clarified that he had been officially informed the embassy was a target. In

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any case, said M'baza, such issues are the purview of the GOT, not the Parliament, which focuses on legislation.

Comment

¶9. (C) The CODEL's visit capped several busy weeks of bilateral engagement, particularly on military issues. The GOT clearly welcomed the visit as another indication of the strong bilateral relationship and chose to highlight economic and security ties while glossing over sensitive political issues. Given the increasing terrorist threat and the urgent need for military assistance, we can expect similar themes to be echoed during FM Abdallah's upcoming visit to Washington.

¶10. (C) On counterterrorism cooperation, officials preferred to stick to generalities rather than address the delegation's specific requests for greater information sharing. It is unclear if M'baza's statement that tourist areas were the target of the disrupted cell, or if he in fact was revealing more than he should have about the true threat. Unfortunately, the continued lack of substantive details from the GOT about the event means we have little by which to judge his statement. END COMMENT.

¶11. (SBU) CODEL Tanner did not clear this message.
GODEC